



## Multimedia Exhibition Explores Mental Health, Illness

**A review of Fine Line, on view at 701 CCA through April 25.**

by : Mary Bentz Gilkerson

Our society has certain preconceptions about mental illness, what it looks like and what it means, to the extent that we begin to see those who suffer from it as being not only different from us, but also less than human. The main purpose of Michael Nye's photography and audio documentary project, *Fine Line: Mental Health/Mental Illness*, is to dispel that myth — to literally give the issue a human face, in this case nearly 40 of them.

The 701 Center for Contemporary Art is showing a selection of approximately 40 of the almost 60 pieces that are the final product of the project. Nye uses large format photographic portraits and the subjects' own voices to tell each individual's story, to engage the viewer's empathy and move our perception of those living with mental illness beyond the stereotypical. The exhibit will be up through April 25.

The fine line of the title is the very narrow distinction between mental illness and mental health. Nye spent several years interviewing, photographing and recording stories of people with a variety of mental health disorders ranging from schizophrenia and depression to obsessive-compulsive, anxiety and bi-polar disorders.

Nye recorded images of each person's physical presence with a large-format camera, making the final print almost life-sized. Their stories, ranging from four to six minutes, are contained in small wooden boxes mounted below the images, each holding a CD player and instructions. Headphones allow the viewer to listen to each story with a degree of privacy that makes the experience a much more individual one with this exhibit. The stories are hauntingly poignant, telling not only about abuse, fear, confusion and pain, but also about joy and love.



Michael Nye, Michael

The photographs have all the formal elegance and beauty of a Mapplethorpe. There are no real clues from the images themselves that the subjects are different in any way from the viewer. In fact, without knowing the title of the exhibit or having access to the stories, the viewer might assume that these are simply incredibly well done portraits of ordinary, average people — which is exactly Nye's point.

Some are straightforward headshots, like Joe, Stephen and Debra. Their eyes engage the viewer directly in a conversation that is not so much confrontational as inescapable. Some are three-quarter or full-figure studio shots that focus entirely on the figure. Others, such as Beth, are shot in the person's own environment, giving them a context that adds to their story.

Molly is a stunning image of a middle-aged woman clutching her faux fur coat around her and turning her face away to the right. The viewer's attention is pulled back and forth from the elegance of her profile to her hands clutching her coat. There are no distracting elements in the image, simply the subject and the background. The image captures the ephemeral nature of beauty and time. When the image is contextualized by the framework of the project and the audio, it becomes an eloquent voice describing the fragility of our sense of self.

One of the things many of the subjects identify as a characteristic of their illness is the loss of their sense of self. Nye captures that very effectively in his use of motion blur in a number of the pieces. In Sharon, the woman's figure is moving against the backdrop of an ordinary yard, grass merges into dense bamboo at the edge. Sharon suffers from depression after a childhood plagued with both physical and sexual abuse. The textured patterns of the grass and foliage dominate the image with her figure appearing as a white blur interrupting the landscape.

This is an exhibit that needs to be taken in by degrees over multiple visits. The raw emotion of the narratives combined with the carefully constructed portraits is extremely powerful.

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